

Virtual Conservation of Folk and Outsider Art Environments

The presentation will address the issue of conserving documents pertaining to folk and outsider environmental sites, which by their natures are ephemeral. While conservators are concerned with preserving original works, many outdoor visionary environments cannot be rescued by conservation and preservation treatments or applications. Since the 1970s, I have been interested in the life stories as well as the works of artists who have worked outside the mainstream of fine art. Over the years, especially since the 1980s, I have photographed and video recorded folk and outsider artists and their works. In addition, I have worked alongside colleagues who have dedicated many years of their lives to documenting folk and outsider art and environments. One such individual was James Smith Pierce (1930-2010), whose photographs were widely used in John Beardsley's book, *Gardens of Revelation: Environments by Visionary Artists* (Abbeville Press, 1995). Following Dr. Pierce's passing, the University of North Dakota Art Collections acquired a large collection of photographic documents related to folk and outsider art that he had taken during the period of the 1970s and 1980s. This invaluable collection of photographic materials includes many super-8 films, Kodak Ektachrome color slides, and stereoscopic slides that were taken in the mid-1970s of folk art environments, some of which no longer exist and others that were seriously altered through restorations. Having this photographic collection, which consists of thousands of documents, poses many problems involving the preservation of the documents themselves—as well as offering possibilities for conservation of existing sites because the photographic images provide information about the way environments appeared about 35 years ago. The paper will discuss the scope of this collection and issues involving the longevity of photographic and digital documents, and how these documents might assist conservators in their work.

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Biographical Statement:

Born and raised in Queens, New York, I completed my PhD in art history at Case-Western Reserve University. My professional career began in the 1970s at the University of Kentucky,

where I became interested in folk and outsider art and organized exhibitions for regional museums, authored catalogs, presented papers at professional conferences, and served as an Associate of UK's Appalachian Center. In the 1990s, I became a department chair at Radford University, where I offered a class and organized a large exhibition on folk and outsider art. More recently, at the University of North Dakota, I was appointed by the University President to serve as Director of UND Art Collections, where I have acquired a large collection of photographic and film documents—many of which are records of outdoor visionary folk environments that were formerly in the possession of Dr. James Smith Pierce of Belfast, Maine. I am now in the process of researching and conserving these materials.